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# Artists of Abraham Lincoln portraits

Harry Berthrong

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



# His Remembrance of Lincoln.

Comrade Harry Berthrong, Lynn, Mass., who served almost three years in the 140th N. Y., is an artist of national reputation. His portrait of Abraham Lincoln is probably his best effort, and has been copied by the best magazines and works of art in America. It is considered the premier likeness of the lamented President, and Berthrong has in his possession a letter from his son, Robert Lincoln, in which he states that it is by far the best portrait of his father in existence, which seems to be honor enough.

This leads up to a story of Lincoln. The "Olin Gang," formed years ago by "Billy" Olin, when he was secretary of state, of Civil War Veterans of Massachusetts, and attaches of the State House and close friends, is an

organization which meets monthly, feasts and makes merry. The chairman of the entertainment committee is called "the foreman of the gang," and it is his sole duty to provide for the afternoon's enjoyment. Harry Berthrong was the foreman at the last meeting, which occurred on Feb. 6. Being so near Lincoln's birthday, it was termed Lincoln Day, and hanging on the wall at the head table was Berthrong's portrait of the President, for which he has at various times been offered a handsome figure.

After dinner, when the cigars were lighted, Berthrong arose and stated that as it was Lincoln Day he was going to tell a Lincoln story. After asking of those present if any of them ever had a personal interview with the war President, and receiving a negative answer, he told this story:

"I had served a year in the army and had in my pocket a furlough of two weeks, which I had made up my mind to spend with my poor old mother in the old home at Rochester. I had left my regiment behind and had reached Washington the night before this incident happened. I had then studied art and with what natural ability I possessed could do quite a fair stunt at sketching. It was mid-morning, and I had taken a position upon the lawn of the White House, for I had determined to take home to my mother a view of the place wherein were the brains of the National Government.

"I had been sketching for some little time and was taking considerable pains with my work. I was alone, or thought I was, until a shadow passed over my paper. Casually I looked around to learn the cause when my eyes beheld the form of Abraham Lincoln. Just he and I were alone. Somewhat embarrassed in his presence, with that sad, but kindly face looking down upon me, I felt my smallness compared with his greatness. He laid his hand on my shoulder and leaned over to get a closer view of the sketch. Straightening up he said, 'Young man, you seem to have considerable artistic ability. For whom are you making that sketch?' 'My mother,' I replied. 'Then you have a mother,' he said. 'Where is she, and did you leave her to defend your country?'

"I then told him who I was, what regiment I belonged to, when and where I enlisted, all in answer to his questions, and that I wanted to take back to my mother some memento of Washington, and it was because of this that I was there. He then asked me the time limit of my furlough, and I told him it was for two weeks. 'Two weeks to go to Rochester to see your mother? My dear boy that is only half long enough. Come with me.' And then with Lincoln's arm across my shoulder he and I strode across the lawn toward the White House, a place in those days I never expected to enter.

"Up the steps he led the way and into the office of the Secretary of War, where he told my story and asked the Secretary to extend my furlough two weeks, 'for, you know, this may be the last time his dear old mother may see him.' Good and great Lincoln. Here he was in the midst of the most troublous of times, and yet he deigned

to make friendly and give of his time to make conditions better for a private in the ranks. After my furlough had been extended it was handed to the President, who handed it to me.

"He walked out and I followed him. 'I wish you would come into my office a moment, will you?' Again I was embarrassed, and evidently he saw it. So placing again his hand on my shoulder to reassure me, we went into his room. Here he pulled up a chair and asked me to sit down. 'What did you say you were going to do with that sketch?' he asked. I then retold the story that I was to take it home to my mother as a memento. 'Why?' 'I would like it. It's a splendid piece of work, and I should like to own it.' I gave it to him gladly, and then he requested me to put my name on the back, my regiment and my home town, all of which I did; glad, indeed, that he thought enough of it to own it.

"He told me that I could easily make another for my mother; told me to go home and spend the entire time with, to me, the dearest woman on earth, and that if I was living at the close of the war to call on my way home. He then shook my hand and went with me to the door, bidding me good-by. His act was and has been an inspiration to me all my life. Because of his kindness I loved him, and because I loved him I put my heart and soul into that portrait, which is acknowledged to be the best of him in existence. Little did Lincoln dream of his tragic end. His last words to me, 'If you are living at the close of the war call on your way home,' are as clear and dear as of yesterday. He was 'home' before I left the army, the greatest man, to me, in 'all time.'

Dist. Trib., April 15, 1915



Everything, timing

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